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# Silence, Subversions, Sound-bothering, and Swans

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*1 2 3 4 9 11...*

My sister's early childhood counting, with its various permutations, is curiously more interesting than the prescribed pattern, due to its ingenuous — and ingenious — flouting of the rules. She reinvented the ancient mantric practice in a method that circumvented thinking, or, at least, starting with the learnt, she extrapolated a personalized sequence derived from the limits of memory, the repetitive rhythmic tread and incantations of parental ritual. She thought *counting*, and opened her mouth. The concept is deceptively simple, akin to saying New Zealand artist Colin McCahon thought *numbers* and picked up his brush. It's more that these examples demonstrate the *numberness* of numbers. This is not to refer to the numberness of pedagogical recognition, but to a sense of numberness as an abstracted state. The *beingness* of number.

You could equate the idea with the ubiquitous *oneness*, understood most often as a spiritual term referring to a state of lack of identity or the idea of the interconnectness of everything. There's a kind of wilfulness at play too, in both Lucy's ordering, and McCahon's handpainted numeric displays, as if discipline has been subverted - which is exactly how imagination operates, when you think about it.

I equate the extrapolation with the act of creativity. The parallel is unmistakable. Beginning from a place of thought, of intellect, the artist, astronaut-like, jumps off the security of a metaphorical Earth into a galaxy of potential. She is

tethered to the safety harness of a knowledge bank, but free enough to journey to, and through, a realm of uncertainty. This leap into the unknown is crucial to the creative process, and specifically to my practice as a composer. Painter Agnes Martin described the state of being uncertain as being *permanently derailed*.<sup>1</sup>

She knew that, along with the sense of vulnerability that this entails, there is a wonderful freedom – the freedom of not being on the rails, of not being set on a given path from which no detour is possible. Like Harold and his fat purple crayon of the memorable children's book, the artist/composer is able to draw her own path, her own world.<sup>2</sup>

The leap, fall, or journey into unknown territory is a well-trodden trope from literature to cinema, from *The Odyssey* to *Alice in Wonderland*, the excursion into the Zone in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* to Tolkein/Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*. In music, however, the journey occurs in the creating itself, via the composer's intentions, illuminated by the successful manipulation of tension, by way of rhythm, melody, harmony, structure, and interrelationships of timbre, texture, gesture and so on. When we listen, we may conjure a narrative, a journey, or anything at all quite frankly, but it is only ever suggested by the sounds themselves. That is why I relish working in the sonic domain, as it is akin to abstract painting. There are few, if any rules, but tension needs to be present.

The visionary cinematic master Tarkovsky preferred metaphors to symbols. He favoured indefinite imagery, and this is my also my preference, although the gap between something metaphorical and symbolic is slim enough to slip a plectrum between. In music, subject matter is mediated through sonic imagery, like Ravel's cascades of piano arpeggios in his piano music, or sonic metaphor, including those works with clear programmatic conceits, such as Mahler's *Symphony No. 2*, a 90-minute meditation on existence itself, or Strauss's *Don Quixote*. In score-based music, notation provides the symbolic form to transmit the language to the interpreter, for symbols to be translated into sound.

The leap into the unknown is intrinsically a quest whose outcome is unclear. The journey itself is the point. Near the beginning of the 2018 Claire Denis film *High Life*, the protagonist Monte, *drops a tool while repairing the outside of the spaceship, an event that exposes his vulnerability, but also, by implication, our shared Earthbound precariousness*.<sup>3</sup> It's a key act that highlights uncertainty and the unknown on a cosmic level.

I'm also thinking of some of McCahon's masterworks, the *Jump* series. The trajectory in those can be depicted as a straight dotted line appearing near the top of an ominous black oblong. Art writer Justin Paton describes the Muriwai, West Auckland environs and portent of these canvasses,

This space [...] was one of real risk for people and of real ‘jumps’ for the fledgling tākapu...To reach the sky, or get to the other side, we need to jump out and over these obstacles...The word ‘JUMP’, which usually stands on the beach below the towers is, then, a kind of directive – an instruction issued by the painter who is telling us to leap, to be brave.<sup>4</sup>

To leap, to be brave, that is a worthy mandate for any creative. The imperative is as deceptively simple as ‘what if?’ You must be willing, open, and ready, — like prepping for a dive. The High Diving Board Problem is a real one, something easily understood, and equally, easily avoided. As Martin Luther King said,

You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1 Awhitu Peninsula, 2017 EdeCR

Extrapolations, jumps, leaps, falls, subversions, all are bread and butter for me as a sound-botherer. The examples above are potential springboards, not least since they allow approaches and ideas to emerge away from the details of specifically musical concerns. This surfacing often happens during movement of different types, when some of my strongest epiphanies occur. Walking, ironing, driving, cycling, sweeping or swimming will do, because activity loosens the physical and mental joints, and

starts the synapses fizzing. Motion engages me in a ritualized inner choreography, which conjures somatic creative swerves, sweeps, shoves, circles, and splashes of sound, all promising for performance works.

Even observing gestures and patterns of movement can be enough. In the image below, I remember watching through the windscreen in a semi-euphoric post-operative anaesthetic blur, as my son took to the car with suds and vigour. In such observations, rather than intellectually musing about a Lichtenstein brushstroke painting, or imagining a monochromatic Judy Millar, I instinctively evoke a sonic gesture. I hear and see the aural equivalent, neither specifically acoustic nor digital, but internal, as if my motionless arm is moving onomatopoeically.

Inspiration for my work comes from unpredictable sources including snatches of sounds; a pedestrian buzzer in Sydney provided the rhythmic material for the soloists in my *Triple Clarinet Concerto* at a key point. At the end of the *Patti Smith: Dream of Life* doco, the repeated piano chiming B $\flat$  of her *The Jackson Song* was cleverly deployed to create a mesmerising finale. I left the cinema in a somnolent state, the cardiac lub-dub resonating. It's stayed with me ever since. Dream sequences can be equally special. Thirty years ago or so I woke from a percussive, numberty type of dream with a group of five repeated notes sounding in my head, and ever since, both the quintuplet, and repeated notes and chords, have been features of my music.



Figure 2: Auckland, 2017 EdeCR



Along with freedom of limb, walking, in particular, allows freedom of mind, thought, and openness to possibility, — the opposite of the dedicated close reading or concentrating on the creative task in hand. It's a kind of perambulatory contemplation, with the 'what if?' mode fully engaged.

The fluid, fugitive nature of memory allows me to summon up, or dismiss clouds or shards of nostalgia, beautiful or bitter, or evoke hazy images, and transform them, as if by magic, into sound. Sometimes the memories run so deep as to be unfathomable. This may be even better, as specificity can cramp the imagination.



Figure 3: Auckland, 2016 EdeCR

On the side of Victoria Park Market in central Auckland near where I live, there appeared a few years ago brand new white boxes, presumably awaiting bold ads for some consumer must-have. As I walked past them, it struck me that they were perfect as they were. Blank, but lit with suggestive light, and reflective qualities, they welcomed any and all possible interpretation. No image, no message, was needed to heighten their impact — in fact, I tried to think of a way that they could possibly be more effective. They had out-Rauschenberged Rauschenberg, completely unintentionally. Sculptor Anish Kapoor understands the seductive qualities of such neutrality, in his much-criticized copywriting of Vantablack, the blackest and most fathomless of blacks. I like his deliberate clumsiness in describing the indescribable:

In the end, I'm talking about myself. And thinking about making nothing, which I see as a void. But then that's something, even though it really is nothing.<sup>6</sup>

The parallel in music is with John Cage's silent work, 4'33", where the perceiver is left to fill in the blank, to contemplate what the work might mean, if anything. I have always been drawn to art and music that allows me a place in which to dwell. Pared back moments are often the most revealing, quiet revelations, serendipitous occasions where sudden, or dawning insights can act as transformative experiences. These experiences may then act as springboards for my practice. In Haneke's film *Amour*, after an explosively emotional scene, the camera, confined as it is to an elegant French apartment, moves away from the elderly couple grappling with the throes of her advancing dementia and pans slowly and silently across their art collection, dwelling for eight seconds on each landscape. I found this sequence heartrending, more so than all the spelt out minutiae of the deteriorating situation, because it expressed so much, obliquely. It showed, not told. The watcher was invited in, to become part of the film herself.

It reminded me of Walter Pater's famous dictum that *art aspires towards the condition of music*.<sup>7</sup> If that is the case, then to what does music aspire? Perhaps music might aspire to the condition of silence. In silence, or emptiness, truths can be revealed more clearly. I believe that the creative act is about a situation in which you find out who you are through such truths. Contemplating say, the minimal canvases of a Rothko, or being immersed in the sparsely populated sonic explorations of a Feldman, you are offered space and time to fill in yourself. You come to meet it, meditate within it...you can become something within it. Meditation, by its very nature, is the antithesis of thinking. Stilling the noise in the mind is the first task — then everything else will follow.

One of my favourite books is Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence*, in which the author explores her fascination with the various degrees of quiet. She says,

Silence itself is a form of freedom; it generates freedom, free choices, inner clarity and strength. A freedom from oneself and a freedom to be oneself.<sup>8</sup>

What I have increasingly found less engaging in the 'act of composing', is all the mindclutter, the mechanics. The pitch choices, the harmonic, rhythmic, melodic, timbral, and textural choices. I long to make a direct, concentrated utterance, a distillation, neither metaphorical, nor symbolic; as simple as a single sound. An expression of significance, a glimpse of insight, an essence. As William Blake put it,

*To see a world in a grain of sand, and a Heaven in a wild flower.<sup>9</sup>*

I have come to prefer a working situation in which I give the artist the opportunity to treat the performance as a meditation, to still the noise in the mind, and to physically embody my intentions. I have explored this approach of stillness, meditation, reduced sound, and deliberate silence in various works, including choreographed solos for drums, bassoon, dancer, and violist. *whisper* (2001) for snare drum, *whorl* (2015) for membrane, *ben/bsn* (2015) for bassoon, and *Twitch* (2019), all also employ unorthodox modes of soundmaking. Here I have come closest to re-interpreting the idea of music to the point of silence. I consider performers and their instruments as a choreographic unit, and in *ben/bsn*, a titular riff on his email address, performer Ben Hoadley and his instrument become one kinetic body, gestural, and suggestive.

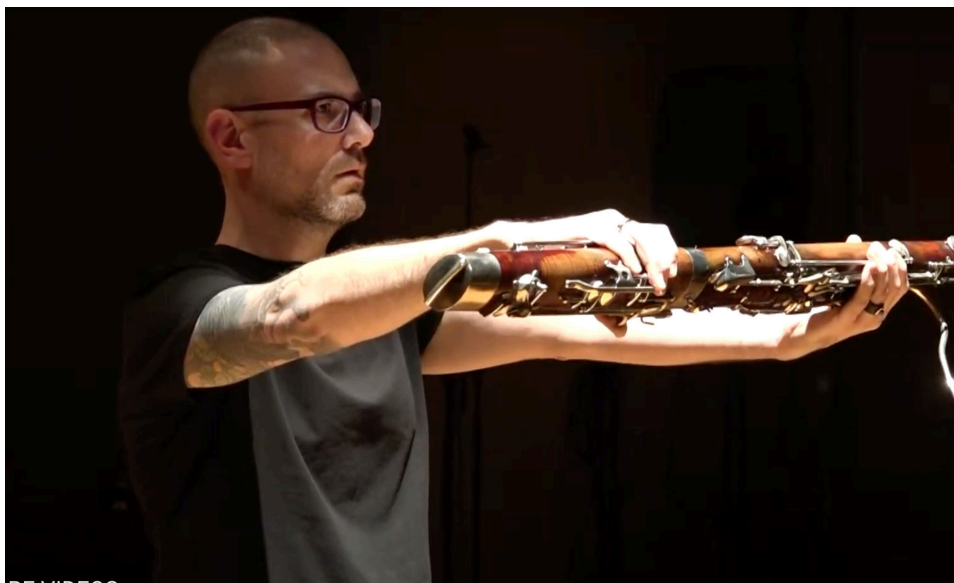


Figure 4: Ben Hoadley performing *ben/bsn* Auckland, 2019. SOUNZ/Chris Watson



## ben/bsn

a microscore for ben hoadley

eve de castro-robinson

Stand motionless, centrestage, then slowly raise instrument horizontally out in front of you, with straight arms, for a count of six. To a count of ten slowly move bassoon above your head (like a weight-lifter). Stretch up tall, arms straight and taut. Count to four. Move it back down to horizontal, then to 45deg to a count of six.

7 Slowly and gently move instrument to lips, and blow one very long breath through middle hole echo with softer breath through top hole

Perc. *fff* *pp* *sf* *ppp*

8 make kissing/sucking sounds for one long breath echo a bit softer slowly move bassoon back to horizontal position, hold for several seconds then slowly lower to hold with straight arms.

Perc. *f* *pp* *mf* *ppp*

9 Keep eyes closed for another few seconds

Perc. *ppp*

Figure 5: Justin De Hart performing whisper, Christchurch 2015. EdeCR



Place of beginning is critical. Practitioners of the Alexander Technique say that good posture, or movement, is first a matter of visualisation, how to feel your head balancing on your spine, your arms and knees into bending forward. Understanding this stillness, and incipient movement, is the key. Thinking it, is activating it. But most importantly, thinking it is *being* it. Doing it, is the next step, but the crucial thing is to think it into being. *Thinking in action*. For *whisper*, pictured above in performance by Justin De Hart, the impetus was the death of composer Iannis Xenakis, it's my tiny nod of respect to that titan of percussion writing. I also ask my performer to undertake a meditation process during the work, to adopt an intense, introspective mien.

The musician strokes, taps and whistles across the metal snares, in restrained choreographed gestures. Ironically, she or he can appear lost in deepest thought in these works, as mental concentration is visually, and palpably akin to contemplation.

*whorl* (2015) for drumhead, was influenced by the practice of sumi-e (black ink painting originating in China), an attempt to capture an essence. In *whorl*, once a gesture is made, it can't be undone, as in sumi-e. Every tiny mark whether sonic or choreographed, is crucial. The process of action is the work itself.



Figure 6: Amy Jansen performing *whorl*, 2015 EdeCR

*whorl* is only a few minutes long but imbued with a strong degree of tension due to the intensity of the performer's vigorous circular drawing. She draws a continuous whorl on the top of the (bass) drumhead from a specified spot, and out toward the edge in tight spirals, before reversing the procedure in a smooth transition.

Below (figure 7) is one of my sumi-e paintings, a miniature. Its only contrivance was the foreknowledge that it would be a hook shape.



Figure 7

Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector brilliantly grasps the over-arching concept of essence:

I'm trying to seize the fourth dimension of this instant-now so fleeting that it's already gone because it's already become a new instant-now that's also already gone. Every thing has an instant in which it is. I want to grab hold of the **is** of the thing.<sup>10</sup>

So, my quest goes on, in a never-ending line. And back to Cage,

An artist conscientiously moves in a direction, putting one work in front of the other with the hope he'll arrive before death overtakes him.<sup>11</sup>

In *Twitch* (2019), the concepts of posture, thinking in action, gesture, and suggestiveness came together in collaboration with dancer Kristian Larsen. I had been preoccupied for some months by my brief but violent hypnagogic jerks on the point of sleep, and became interested in transforming this concept into a performance work. Conscious proprioception (the ability to sense the physical position of one's body in space) is paramount in this improvised work. Of course, an awareness of bodily orientation is crucial to any performer, but most particularly to a dancer. There's also a large element of trust implicit in any collaboration, and I've come to value that reciprocity a good deal. I gave dancer/choreographer Larsen a demo and verbal instructions on the sort of free-form twitchy movements I wanted, and he riffed on his own panoply of jerky variations.



Figure 8: Kristian Larsen rehearses *Twitch*, Auckland 2019 EdeCR

*hand* (2016) is a work for American bass-baritone Nicholas Isherwood, and dedicated to my late father. Dad and I shared a condition called Dupuytren's Contracture, in which the digits of the hand slowly contract inwards. I use my

photographs of his and my hands at advanced stages of contracture in a black and white video to accompany the live voice, and there is a tape part, which utilizes fragments from music that was meaningful to Dad, from brass bands to the first Chopin *Ballade*. It was an elegy written while he was still alive.

The images speak powerfully to me, and in my treatment of them, merging with Isherwood's use of biphonic singing on harmonics and other vocalisations, I hoped the intimate would translate to the universal. I was trying to get to the essence of Dad in a distinctive way, and our compromised hands made a tender angle on this. The singer stands in a still and meditative pose, using choreographed sign language to convey Quiet, Earth, and Love.

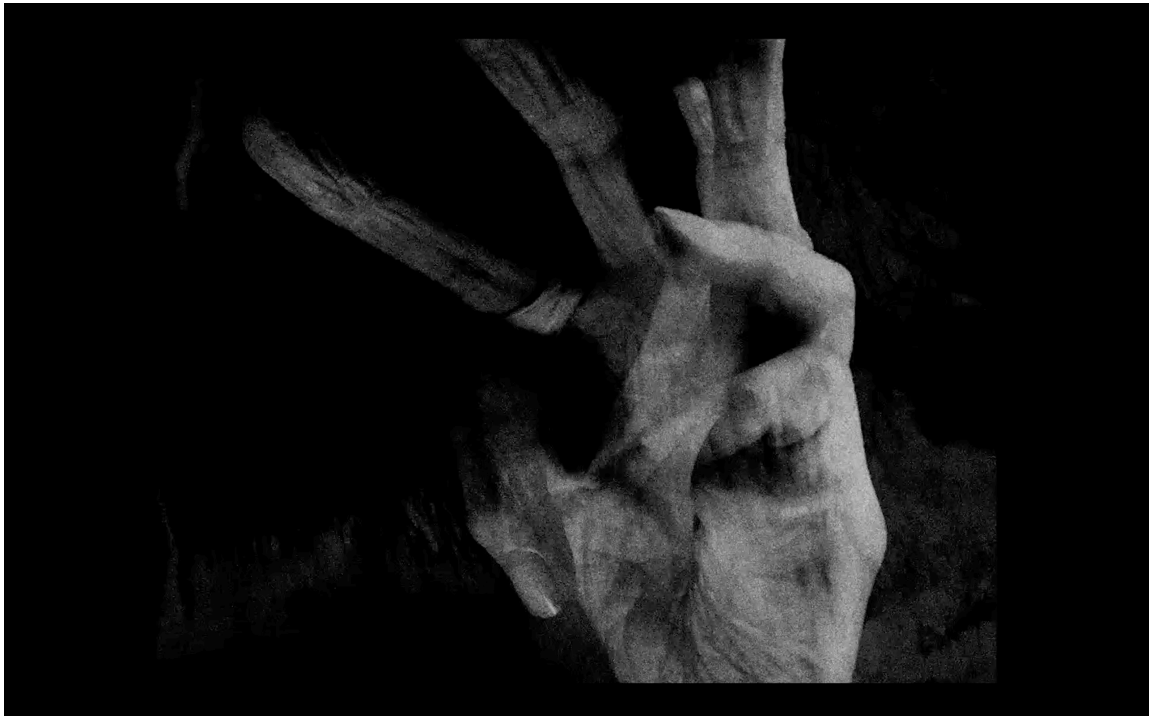


Figure 9: Still from hand, 2016 video by John Kim and Eve de Castro-Robinson



**Performance instructions**

**Voice**

bass-baritone (C2 - Bb4)

- crystal glass filled with water, tuned to G5
- tubular bells with mallet: C4, D4, E4
- bass drum
- tamtam
- soft mallet and medium mallets
- microphone (unobtrusive headset type)

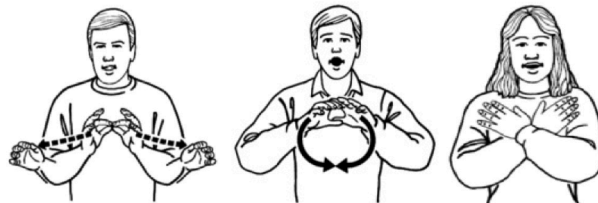
Amplification is required only for the quieter sounds indicated on score

Setup is at the discretion of performer, but it is suggested that the B.Dr. and Tam-tam are either side of singer, with T.bells hanging individually nearby

All percussion changes and choreographic gestures should be made smoothly

Hand choreography is from New Zealand Sign Language

The signs, illustrated below, are Quiet, Earth, and Love, and are to be made in very slow motion



My solo microscores, as outlined above, are one way of expressing essence, as are slow or highly reductive pieces of music. For larger forces. *host* (2015) for the Auckland Chamber Choir consists of one chord, the fundamental and selected partials of A, spread vertically over a mixed choir. The singers slowly enter, intoning different vowel shapes on the pitches and the whole is sculpted through time like the flock of birds suggested in title. I wanted to keep the premise of the work as simple as possible and just let the sound work its magic in time, and in space. One chord, à la Stockhausen's lengthy *Stimmung* can be a spellbinding experience, as long as certain parameters are varied.

Many of our most powerful experiences are suggestive. Our most personal moments of recognition — the smile of our child, a hand's touch, the back of the head of an aging parent, a faint blush, a slightly raised eyebrow; all can tell us what we need to know. These are the moments I long to express in my music but since their intimate power is so well encapsulated in my memory, a time-based experience would dilute their effect. Photography can often get close to capturing an expressive moment, and we know that painting and sculpture can, it's the essence of their power, but it's very challenging in music to get to a fundamental. I don't believe knowledge, or research, are at the core of the creative process, rather, this process relies on the ability to seize the moment instinctively. How you develop instinctual values is by a non-intellectual sensibility. Ideas don't figure so strongly,

they are not that useful *in themselves* for the creative process — like opinions, everyone has one — it's easy to be opinionated and it's easy to have an idea. They are useful for advancing one's creative impulse. Research, the *sine qua non* of the university system, is to me most useful and telling, when something emerges from the wellsprings of my own musings and feelings. As Krishnamurti said:

You cannot think of that which you do not know (...) the mind discovers that any form of conclusion, opinion, prevents the free flow of energy.<sup>12</sup>

Insight is the key, or experiences that help you discover who you are in order to develop a deeper capacity for insight. I believe that rather than learning from experiences, you grow by your inner nature being in contact with them. Ironically, the act of composing itself can get in the way of creativity, which is an *open state of being*. In my years teaching composition, I often began the Stage 2 class by asking the students about the soundscape on their way to the lecture theatre. What was the loudest sound, I'd ask? This was early March in late summer, when the street was lined with plane trees rustling with dense foliage. Silence, before 'traffic?', and 'talking?...and perhaps, 'wind?' For some reason, very few ever answered the obvious, all-prevailing sound of the high-frequency cicadas, furiously clicking in the trees above. If they weren't aware of this dominating feature of the acoustic environment, how would they make the next step of coaxing a new work into being? How could they take the jump?

In *Just Kids*, Patti Smith recalls her first memory of the creative impulse, a crucial, evocative recognition after sighting a balletic white swan:

Swan, my mother said, sensing my excitement. It pattered the bright water, flapping its great wings, and lifted into the sky. The word alone hardly attested to its magnificence nor conveyed the emotion it produced. The sight of it generated an urge I had no words for, a desire to speak of the swan, to say something of its whiteness, the explosive nature of its movement, and the slow beating of its wings.<sup>13</sup>

This morning, I am flooded with aural information and sensations. I was too late for the dawn chorus in my city garden. The cat *reows* at the window. I turn the radio on — a recent hit opens with an unreformed Alberti bass, prominent in the mix. A Mozartian trope in the twenty-first century, it's the equivalent of wearing hoop skirts and panniers under denim, a remarkably resilient musical trope. How to move forward musically without wearing 18<sup>th</sup> century Vienna as a badge, — or any other

card-carrying — is an issue for any tonal composer. Cage-like, I try not to separate quotidian sonic events; the aural environment (including avian squawks, trills, whirs, clicks and burrs), and the conventional parameters of performed and recorded music itself. There's no other way for me to move in the twenty-first century. It's all about glimpsing my swans.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Accessed from: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/31/agnes-martin-john-gruen-interview/>
- <sup>2</sup> Johnson, C. (1955). *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, Harper & Brothers.
- <sup>3</sup> Accessed from: Garden, S. (2019). <https://steve-garden-talking-pictures.squarespace.com/talking-pictures/2019-nz-film-festival?rq=high%20life>
- <sup>4</sup> Paton, J. (2019). *McCahon Country*, Auckland Art Gallery, Penguin.
- <sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., [\*Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices on Resistance, Reform, and Renewal\*](#) *an African American Anthology* (2000).
- <sup>6</sup> Accessed from: <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/anish-kapoor/>
- <sup>7</sup> Pater, W. (2011). THE SCHOOL OF GIORGIONE. In *The Works of Walter Pater* (Cambridge Library Collection - Literary Studies, pp. 130-154). Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- <sup>8</sup> Maitland, S. (2009). *The Book of Silence*, Granta.
- <sup>9</sup> Blake, W., & Baskin, L. (1968). *Auguries of innocence*. New York: Printed anew for Grossman Publishers.
- <sup>10</sup> Lispector, C. (2012). *Agua Viva*. New Directions Publishing.
- <sup>11</sup> Cage, J. (1961). *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*. Wesleyan University Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Accessed from: <https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/you-can-learn-only-if-you-do-not-know>
- <sup>13</sup> Smith, P. (2010) *Just Kids*. Ecco.